# Discussion Paper Truancy Among Dakota County Youth: Current Program Status and Next Steps

Prepared by: Dakota County Community Services Planning August 7, 2006

#### What is the issue/problem?

Truancy Defined

The National Center for School Engagement<sup>1</sup> defines truancy broadly, as any unexcused absence from school. This may mean absenteeism for part or all of a school day.

Minnesota law defines a "continuing truant" as:

- An elementary school student absent from instruction without valid excuse for 3 or more days during a school year; or
- A junior/middle, or high school student absent without valid excuse for 3 or more class periods across 3 days within a school year (Minn. Stat. 2005, Sect. 260A.02, Subd. 3).

A "habitual truant" is "a child under the age of 16 years who is absent from attendance at school without lawful excuse..."

- For 7 school days if the child is an elementary school student; or
- For one or more class periods on seven school days if the child is a junior/middle school, or high school student.

The definition of habitual truancy also applies to "a child who is 16 or 17 years of age who is absent from attendance at school without lawful excuse for one or more class periods on seven school days and who has not lawfully withdrawn from school..." (Minn. Stat. 2005, Sect. 260C.007, Subd. 19).

#### Prevalence

As Garry (1996) has observed, whereas for most students, skipping school used to be regarded as an isolated instance of mischievous behavior, it is has now escalated to the point of being a serious social problem. In some school districts in large urban areas, rates of daily absenteeism can reach as high as 30%.

On a local level, the problem is less severe, although worse than one might expect. Dakota County is home to 10 school districts and over 135 schools. Attendance rates in the county almost exactly mirror statewide averages by grade. Countywide average attendance, at 93.97% (translates to 6.03% absenteeism on any given day), is just below the statewide average of 94.62% (5.38% absenteeism rate) for all grades.<sup>2</sup>

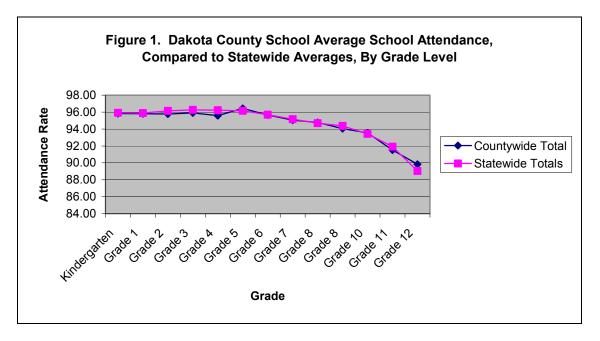
Assuming approximately 175 days of instruction per year at most schools, with 6.03% average absenteeism in the County, it is the norm for students to miss more than 10 days per year. Since this is an average, it is likely that many students miss very few days of school, while others miss considerably more. It is the latter group who are at educational risk due to excessive absenteeism.

Although no exact numbers are available, in the past, Dakota County school officials have estimated excessive absenteeism is characteristic of about 2-4% of students. Public school enrollment in Dakota County ranged from slightly under 73,000 students to almost 74,000 students between the 2000-1 and 2004-5 schools years.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>1</sup> See <u>www.truancyprevention.org</u> for more information on the National Center for School Engagement.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>2</sup> Data from Minnesota Department of Education are for the 2003-2004 academic year (most recent available.)

However, looking at absenteeism, it is clear from Figure 1 that attendance rates decline starting in about the 7<sup>th</sup> grade. Enrollments for 7<sup>th</sup> through 12th grade students in Dakota County public schools ranged from about 33,500 to 35,350 during these school years. Based on 7<sup>th</sup> through 12 grade enrollments, using the 2-4% figure, the target population of students with excessive absenteeism ranges from 700 to 1400 students.

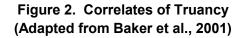


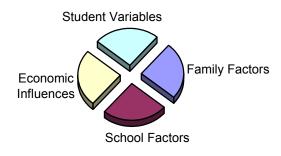
It is then useful to compare the target population of students with absenteeism to the numbers actually referred as truant by schools. Truancy referrals, primarily of students in the  $7^{th}$ -12th grades, ranged from 561 to 681 per year during the period. Comparing truancy referrals to  $7^{th}$ -12th grade enrollments, referrals represented from 1.6% to 1.95% of students in these grades.

#### What causes truancy?

Truancy problems are generally regarded as having multiple causes. Rarely does a student present with a single concern, which, if resolved, ends the truancy. Causes of truancy may be divided into 4 main categories (examples included for each):

- 1. Family Factors: Lack of parental supervision/control, family conflict, parental chemical use or mental health concerns.
- 2. *Economic Influences:* Student employment, high family mobility rates, parents have multiple jobs, poverty.
- 3. *Student Variables*: Chemical use, poor health, lack of social skills, disability or behavior challenges, running away, peers who skip school.
- 4. *School Factors*: Negative school climate, ineffective discipline system, curriculum not relevant to student's needs.





#### Why is the issue important?

Truancy is a status offense, which is to say the activity is only illegal because it is an act committed by a minor. However, truancy is often regarded as a "gateway offense" because it is often the harbinger of more serious trouble: academically, socially, and economically.

- Academic risk. Regular school attendance is the most reliable predictor of success on the state's basic skills and graduation tests (Myers, 1997).
   Truancy is often an early warning sign of educational failure or risk of dropping out completely.
- Social risk. Numerous studies have established truancy as a risk factor for teen pregnancy, drug and alcohol use, and delinquency. Adults who were truant as children experience a higher incidence of marital problems, violence, and incarceration.
- *Economic risk.* Once again, a number of studies have pointed to a host of poor outcomes for adults who were truant as children: markedly lower earnings, poorer health, and a higher risk of living in poverty.

From a community standpoint, truancy is to be avoided because it results in a host of avoidable public costs due to:

- Higher rates of welfare dependency;
- Higher rates of incarceration;
- A less well-educated workforce;
- A higher incidence of daytime criminal activity by children who are supposed to be in school.

#### What is the current response to truancy in Dakota County?

The Dakota County School Success Program currently works in partnership with area schools and school districts to enforce truancy laws and remove barriers that discourage school engagement. Within the County structure, the School Success

Program involves the cooperation of the County Attorney's office, and the Social Services and Community Corrections Departments. School Success is actually a series of related interventions, described in more detail in Table 1 below.

Table 1. School Success Program Interventions<sup>3</sup>

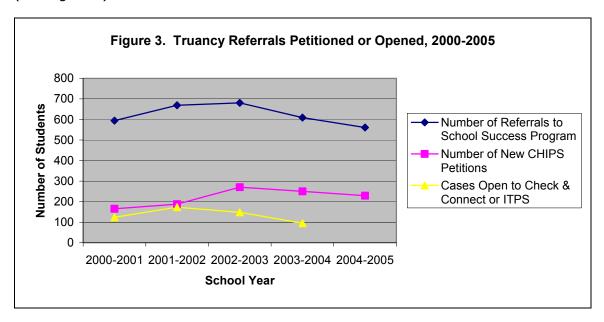
INTERVENTION NAME	LEAD COUNTY DEPARTMENT(S)	DESCRIPTION OF ACTIVITIES	TARGET POPULATION
Accelerated Court Truancy (ACT)	County Attorney	Student and parents attend a group diversion meeting at 3 unexcused absences. At 7 unexcused absences, a court petition is filed and court is scheduled; student is referred to Diversion Program for help before court date.	Students with 3 or more unexcused absences in ISDs 199 (IGH), 197 (WSP/MH), and 200 (Hastings).
Diversion Program	Social Services, Community Corrections	Conducts individual diversion meetings with parents and kids at 7 unexcused absences. With the exception of ACT participants, court is diverted unless truancy continues.	Any student with 7 or more unexcused absences.
Intermediate Risk Supervision	Social Services, Community Corrections	More intensive monitoring of school attendance and other concerns based on risk factors identified by Diversion Program.	Intermediate-risk clients.
Ongoing High- Risk Truancy Services	Social Services	Intensive monitoring of school attendance and other concerns based on identified risk factors.	High-risk clients.

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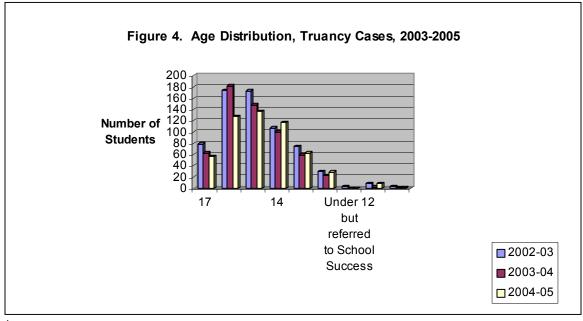
<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>3</sup> Students experiencing truancy concerns who already have a case open to Social Services or Community Corrections receive general case management or supervision services delivered by probation, child protection, chemical, and or mental health staff to remediate factors contributing to truancy and other concerns.

#### Who do the current interventions serve?

For school years 2000-01 through 2004-05,<sup>4</sup> the number of students referred each year ranged from a high of 681 in 2002-03 and a low of 561 in 2004-05. The average percentage of referrals petitioned for truancy over the 5-year period was 35%. The percentage of cases opened to Check and Connect or ITPS<sup>5</sup> averaged 21% over 5 years. Trend lines in both cases generally follow that of overall referrals (see Figure 3).



Across the time span analyzed, setting aside the few children under age 12 for which exact age is not described in the summary data, average age of the students referred was 14 years, 11 months. Either ages 15 or 16 were the modal (or most often served) age for all years in the span.

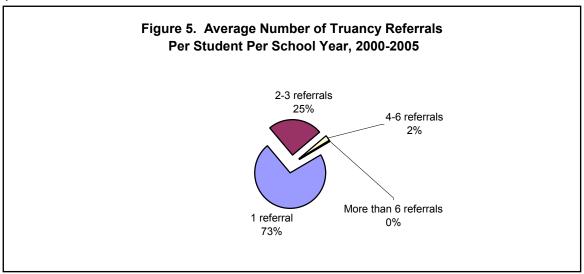


<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>4</sup> Most recent school year for which complete data are available.

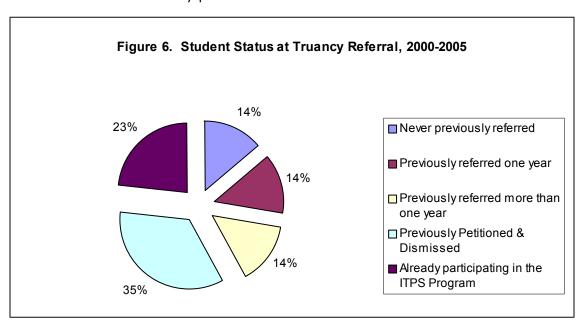
<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>5</sup> Now called "Intermediate Risk Supervision."

#### How successful are the current interventions?

One measure of the success of a program of this type is how little "repeat business" the program receives. Unfortunately, lacking comparison data, we will have to evaluate Dakota County's success without the benefit of context. From school years 2000-01 through 2004-05, fully 25% of the remaining students received 2-3 referrals during a school year. The vast majority of students (73%) experienced only a single referral to School Success. Nearly three-quarters of the students referred did not require additional attention after the initial referral within that school year.



However, looking at data across the five-year study period, only 14% of students referred were previously unknown to the program, while 23% were currently open to intensive services at the time of referral. In fully 86% of cases, students were currently open to or had previously been referred for truancy, perhaps confirming the chronic nature of truancy problems.



One way of measuring the overall effectiveness of the School Success Program is comparing student attendance prior to and following the diversion meeting, a key intervention in the program. While these data were only available for the most recent full school year (2004-05), they show that diversion meetings are effective in significantly reducing tardies, unexcused and excused absences, and suspensions the month after the meeting, as compared to the month prior. However, within School Success as a whole, by 3 months following diversion, attendance problems had increased nearly equal to -- and in some categories exceeding -- the extent of the problem prior to the intervention.

Table 2. Percent Change in School Attendance Following Diversion Meeting, As Compared to Month Prior to Meeting, All Schools, 2004-05

	TARDY	UNEXCUSED	SUSPENDED	EXCUSED
1 MO. AFTER	-26%	-44%	-25%	-14%
3 MO. AFTER	+139%	+106	+92%	+92%

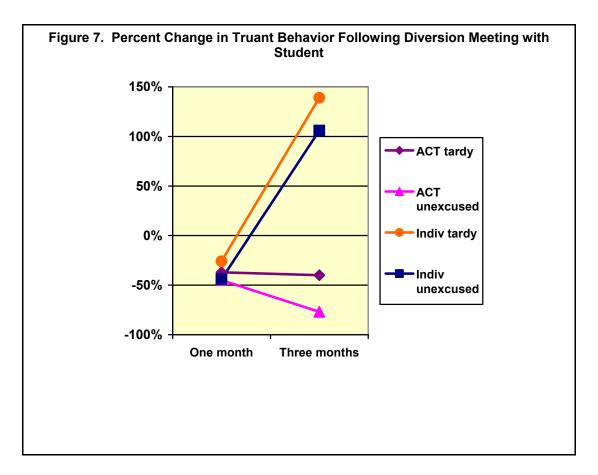
A subprogram within School Success continuum, the ACT program, has been in operation since the 2002-03 school year. One way of specifically judging ACT's success is calculating the level of participation and the outcomes of the subgroup participating in ACT. Although ACT's performance varied by school and by district, the program achieved a composite attendance rate of 44% across the 2003-04 and 2004-05 school years for the ACT meeting intervention. Across the same two school years, students invited to participate in ACT were petitioned at only an 11% rate, as compared to 35% for the overall population. Students actually participating in ACT, only 26% were later petitioned.

In terms of impact on attendance, ACT also performed well. Based on data available for all three school years of operation, tardies, unexcused absences and skips all decreased significantly in the month following the ACT meeting as compared with the month prior. Interestingly, excused absences increased significantly during the same time frame. In none of the years studied did the increase in excused absences exceed the improvement in other attendance categories. Therefore, improvements in attendance appear to be real, at least for the short term.

Table 3. Percent Change in School Attendance Following ACT Meeting, As Compared to Month Prior to Meeting, All Schools, All-Year Average

	TARDY	UNEXCUSED	SKIPS	EXCUSED
1 MO. AFTER	-37%	-45%	-30%	+43%
3 MO. AFTER	-40%	-77%	-36%	-19%

The following graph illustrates the results of individual and ACT group diversions on tardies and unexcused absences at one month and three months following intervention:



As the graph shows, Accelerated Court Truancy (ACT) group diversion meetings and individual diversion meetings were both effective in reducing truancy one month following the intervention. Reductions in incidents range from 26 to 45 percent. At three months following intervention, however, the ACT group diversion meetings show much more success in students staying on track with attendance. Truancy of either type increased following an individual diversion meeting, while students attending ACT group diversion meetings continued to show reductions in truant episodes. It is thought that this success is due in large part to the early referral to diversion in the ACT-participating schools, and to the school's more active role in addressing truancy in that approach.

Another subprogram within the School Success continuum is the Intensive Truancy Prevention Program (ITPS). ITPS was once provided by an external vendor, but has now been brought in-house at Dakota County. Outcome data provided by the contracted vendor are only available in a slightly different format. However, at least for the 2002-03 school year, the data show similarly positive results in decreasing truant behavior among students served.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>6</sup> The school year for which complete data are available. Data include the 90 youth served by Lutheran Social Service in the ITPS program during the 2002-03 school year (August 1, 2002 - June 30, 2003) who had a full year of measurable statistics relating to their attendance. The remainder (58) were either discharged prior to the end of the school year or were new to the caseload too late in the year to be counted.

Table 4. Percent Change in School Attendance Following ITPS Intervention, 2002-03 School Year

	TARDY	UNEXCUSED	SKIPS	EXCUSED
PERCENT OF STUDENTS EXPERIENCING IMPROVEMENT IN THIS ATTENDANCE CATEGORY	63%	64%	57%	90%
AVERAGE PERCENTAGE REDUCTION IN ABSENTEEISM AMONG STUDENTS WHO IMPROVED, BY CATEGORY	-65%	-71%	-64%	-81%

About half of the students involved in ITPS for the 2002-03 school year also showed a reduction in the number of suspensions. All told, about three-quarters of the ITPS participants improved in 3 or more of the above attendance categories. Only a very small number (under 6%) showed no improvement at all.

### What does the research tell us about what works in truancy intervention programs?

A number of different sources have enumerated qualities that research tells us make for successful truancy interventions. A number of the characteristics listed below have been cited by several studies as "promising practices;" others that seem particularly relevant to this jurisdiction are included as well.

Table 5. Top 11 Research-Identified Characteristics of Successful Truancy Intervention Programs

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- 1. Expecting schools to operate as the front line in ongoing truancy prevention and enforcement, and as partners in deep-end juvenile justice system-based enforcement.
- 2. School attendance policies should be strong, developed with broadly-based participation, well-publicized, consistently enforced.
- 3. Student absences should be followed by a contact from the school.
- 4. Efforts to address underlying causes of truancy.
- 5. Collaboration with families and across agencies.
- 6. A continuum of prevention and intervention strategies, a comprehensive approach to prevention and intervention.
- 7. Meaningful incentives and sanctions for students and/or for parents.
- 8. Meaningful parental involvement.
- 9. Involve local law enforcement in efforts.
- 10. Develop a supportive or relationship-based context for serving families.
- 11. Ongoing data tracking and evaluation.

#### Recommendations

Recommendations developed at this stage of the project are as follows:

- To expand a modified version of ACT to new school district(s) starting in the 2007-08 school year. The new model will not result in automatic court filing at 7 unexcused absences, but rather will reserve court-based intervention for chronic truants, with multiple filings. When this expansion occurs, a revised ACT model (dubbed "ACT 2") will be implemented in lieu of the existing model in the new schools, as well as the school districts currently participating in ACT. Appendix A shows the revised continuum of truancy services post implementation.
- To revise data collection efforts to better track elements across the departments and divisions involved in truancy intervention.

#### **Next Steps**

The next steps focus on implementation of the new ACT model as well as the improved data tracking. At this writing, the following actions have taken place or are in process:

- A meeting has already occurred with area Superintendents to assess their interest in being ACT expansion sites for the 2007-08 school year. They are to officially notify the County Attorney's Office by fall if they wish to be included in the expansion.
- Both the County Attorney's Office and the Community Services Division are seeking funding for additional staff capacity in the truancy area.
- A draft implementation work plan for the expansion of ACT has been completed (see Appendix B).
- A plan for data collection going forward is included in Appendix C.

#### References

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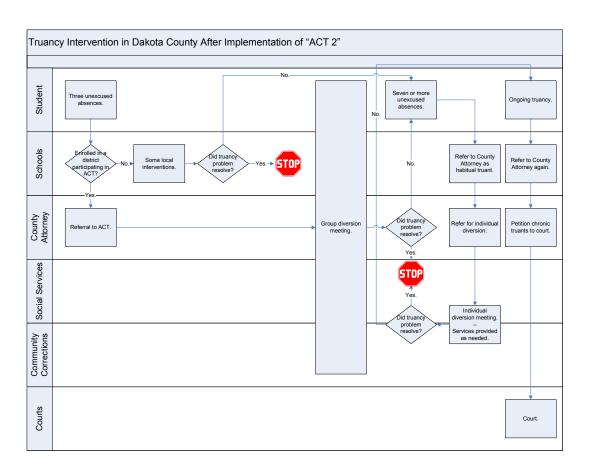
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## Appendix A Truancy Continuum: Interventions in Dakota County After Implementation of "ACT 2"

	PRE- DIVERSION	GROUP DIVERSION (DISTRICTS PARTICIPATING IN ACT 2 ONLY.)	INDIVIDUAL DIVERSION	CONTINUED INTERVENTION WITH SERVICES	COURT INVOLVEMENT
Schools	<ul> <li>Close monitorin g of attendan ce.</li> <li>Provision of school-based interventi ons.</li> </ul>	<ul> <li>At 3         unexcused         absences,         refer to         County         Attorney.</li> <li>Participate         in group         diversion         meeting.</li> <li>Continue         close         monitoring         of         attendance.</li> </ul>	<ul> <li>At 7         unexcused         absences,         refer to         County         Attorney.</li> <li>Continue         close         monitoring         of         attendance.</li> </ul>	<ul> <li>Continue close monitoring of attendance</li> <li>Refer to County Attorney for subsequen t truancy.</li> </ul>	<ul> <li>Continue close monitoring of attendance.</li> <li>Refer to County Attorney for chronic truancy.</li> <li>Attend court hearings as appropriate.</li> <li>Consider alternatives to graduation, if appropriate.</li> </ul>
County Attorney		<ul> <li>Receive referral.</li> <li>Conduct group diversion meeting.</li> </ul>	<ul><li>Receive referral.</li><li>Refer to Community Services.</li></ul>	<ul> <li>Receive referral.</li> <li>Petition to court if truancy continues.</li> </ul>	<ul> <li>File CHIPS petition.</li> <li>Develop recommendat ions and appear in court.</li> </ul>
County (Community Services)			<ul> <li>Conduct individual diversion meeting.</li> <li>Assess risk for ongoing truancy problems.</li> <li>Offer services/monitor attendance as appropriate.</li> </ul>	o Provide intermedia te risk supervision or ongoing high-risk truancy services as appropriat e	<ul> <li>Develop recommendat ions and attend court.</li> <li>Continue to offer/coordin ate services as appropriate.</li> </ul>
Courts				o Calendar case if County Attorney files petition.	<ul> <li>May compel services by court order.</li> <li>May mandate placement or other consequence s such as fines or work crew.</li> </ul>



# Appendix B Truancy Services Project Implementation Work Plan<sup>7</sup> Dakota County Community Services Division/County Attorney's Office June 2006

#### I. Background

A planning process to improve truancy services began in early 2006. A work plan was developed by staff of the Community Services Division (Social Services and Community Corrections departments) and the County Attorney's Office. Some school districts have participated in a Truancy Work Team. The County Attorney and Community Services Division staff briefed school district superintendents in May 2006 regarding preliminary findings and options for revising and improving the approach to truancy services in the County.

The overall project goal of the planning process was to describe and assess current truancy services, review and compare current services and practices to best practices for truancy programs and to make recommendations on improvements which may be included in 2007 budget requests. This planning process is continuing. Looking forward, an implementation plan (this document) has the purpose of laying out steps toward implementing whatever policy decisions are made concerning truancy services.

#### II. Implementation Plan

The Implementation Plan describes steps to be undertaken to implement the revised truancy services approach in the County, who will participate and is responsible and dates by which the steps should be completed. Assumptions of the Implementation Plan are:

- Funding will be available starting in late 2007 for a partial year, full funding available 2008 and forward.
- Policy boards will agree with the approach.
- > Staff time is available within the school districts, County Community Services departments and the County Attorney's Office to implement the plan.
- Effective engagement of the Court and the schools is essential in improving truancy services.

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<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>7</sup> Draft of June 7, 2006.

### **Truancy Services Project Implementation Work Plan**

Process Step	Participating	Responsible	Achievement Date	Notes
Decide on plan     to improve     truancy services	County Attorney School Districts County Community Corrections and Social Services	All	Summer/Fall 2006	
2. Develop strategy for involving schools in County - Canvas school districts and charter schools about interest in participating in ACT including districts which file for truancy	County Attorney School Districts County Community Corrections and Social Services	All	Summer/Fall 2006	
3. Seek policy authority/approval from policy boards (School Districts, County Board) and Courts; consult with Public Defender's Office	County Attorney School Districts County Community Corrections and Social Services Courts Public Defender	All	Fall 2006	Includes school districts deciding if they wish to participant in revised ACT program.
4. Develop detailed policies and procedures for revised ACT program. Including:  - Responsibilities of ISD's, County departments, County Attorney's Office - ACT program admission and referral criteria ACT program services.	County Attorney School Districts County Community Corrections and Social Services	All	Winter 2006	

### Truancy Services Project Implementation Work Plan, page 2 of 2.

Process Step	Participating	Responsible	Achievement Date	Notes
5. <u>Develop detailed</u> <u>policies and</u> <u>procedures</u> for ISD's <u>not</u> participating in revised ACT program. Including: - Responsibilities of ISD's, County departments, County Attorney's Office - ACT program admission and referral criteria ACT program services.	County Attorney School Districts County Community Corrections and Social Services	All	Winter 2006	
6. Develop budget for revised ACT program: - Budget amount and description for truancy services Budget amount and description for new staff Sources of revenue to pay for new truancy services approach.	County Attorney School Districts County Community Corrections and Social Services	All	Fall 2006 (for 2007 budgets) Summer 2007 (for 2008 budgets)	
7. <u>Hire staff</u> to provide truancy services.	County Attorney School Districts County Community Corrections and Social Services	All	Winter 2007	
8. Provide training for new ACT schools Personnel from new ACT schools will observe at current ACT school sites.	County Attorney School Districts County Community Corrections and Social Services	All	Winter 2007	
9. Begin new truancy services program in school districts and in County including training to participate in ACT program	County Attorney School Districts County Community Corrections and Social Services	AII	Winter 2007	

Process Step	Participating	Responsible	Achievement Date	Notes
10. Evaluate implementation of new truancy services program - Effectiveness/results with students - Cost - Difficulty - Suggested improvements for future	County Attorney School Districts County Community Corrections and Social Services	All	Summer 2008	

#### Appendix C Truancy Project – Data Plan

In the future, within Community Services, data regarding the School Success Program will be tracked using the statewide SSIS computer system. A number of additional fields will likely need to be added to SSIS screens in order to track the data elements listed below. A workgroup will be convening shortly to plan for necessary modifications to the SSIS system, as well as addressing plans for training all staff delivering truancy-related services in the use of the new, uniform IT system.

Since much information regarding School Success is currently tracked by the County Attorney's office, plans will need to be made to either continue to have the Attorney's office gather these data, or, preferably, to establish a process for transferring information (perhaps via referral form) to Community Services for tracking in SSIS. The latter option avoids problems characteristic of the current system: multiple data collection sources without a purposeful data-tracking plan in effect across affected departments and divisions.

The County staff workgroup for the Truancy Project is recommending that two broad categories of data be collected regarding the School Success Program going forward.

#### 1. Overall Program Data

Data regarding the overall operation of the program should continue to be collected, including at least the following elements:

- Number of truancy referrals to the County Attorney's office each school year/calendar year;
- Basic demographics regarding the population: age at referral, gender, race;
- Number of students receiving each service each year (would also want to know the number receiving multiple services):
  - ACT group diversion;
  - Individual diversion;
  - Intermediate risk supervision;
  - Ongoing high-risk truancy services;
  - o Court.
- Specific services delivered for individuals receiving an intensity of service equal to or greater than individual diversion (e.g., case management, chemical health assessment, treatment for mental health concerns, family counseling).

#### 2. Pre- and Post-Intervention Outcome Data

Data should be tracked in order to assess the effectiveness of various aspects of the School Success Program in reducing absenteeism. Numbers of absences in the following attendance categories should be tracked for each student:

- Unexcused absences;
- Excused absences;
- Tardies;
- Skips;
- Suspensions.

Attendance in each of the categories should be assessed at the following time periods for each student:

- At program referral;
- At three months prior to any intervention (if possible), and for each intervention;
- At one month prior to any intervention, for each intervention;
- At the time of intervention;
- At one month following any intervention, for each intervention;
- At three months following any intervention, for each intervention.

For purposes of these pre- and post-intervention data elements, the following would be considered dates an intervention occurred:

- ACT group diversion meeting date;
- Individual diversion meeting date;
- Initiation of intermediate risk supervision;
- Initiation of ongoing high-risk truancy services;
- Initial court appearance on truancy petition.

In order to implement this plan, all the data elements listed in bullet points above would need to be tracked by SSIS (or, alternately, some with SSIS and others by the County Attorney's office). This means the following fields would need to be included in SSIS (or another data system):

- Name of student and some type of "unique identifier" if multiple data systems are to be used;
- Age, race, and gender of client;
- Date(s) of referral(s) for truancy services;
- ACT group diversion meeting date;
- Individual diversion meeting date;
- Date of initiation of intermediate risk supervision;
- Date of initiation of ongoing high-risk truancy services;
- Date of initial court appearance on truancy petition;
- A checklist of specific services received within some of the more intensive interventions;
- Open fields to enter the number of absences in all of the categories being tracked, for example:

Intervention: INITIAL PROGRAM REFERRAL

ATTENDANCE	NUMBER OF				
CATEGORY	ABSENCES 3	ABSENCES 1	ABSENCES AT	ABSENCES 1	ABSENCES 3
	MONTHS PRIOR	MONTH PRIOR	INTERVENTION	MONTH	MONTHS
	TO	TO		FOLLOWING	FOLLOWING
	INTERVENTION	INTERVENTION		INTERVENTION	INTERVENTION
Unexcused					
Excused					
Tardies					
Skips					
Suspensions					

Intervention: ACT GROUP DIVERSION

ATTENDANCE	NUMBER OF				
CATEGORY	ABSENCES 3	ABSENCES 1	ABSENCES AT	ABSENCES 1	ABSENCES 3
	MONTHS PRIOR	MONTH PRIOR	INTERVENTION	MONTH	MONTHS
	TO	TO		FOLLOWING	FOLLOWING
	INTERVENTION	INTERVENTION		INTERVENTION	INTERVENTION
Unexcused					
Excused					
Tardies					
Skips					
Suspensions					